A Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Support to Networks
or
"What`s it take to make a network work, if a network could work well?"

Drafted by Sarah Earl, June 2004

Background

Forming and operating networks has been central to IDRC's approach to supporting development research since the outset. They are an important mechanism for fostering and supporting capacity development and as a means of connecting research(ers) to policy process and of supporting North-South and South-South collaboration.

In 2003, a group of IDRC staff voluntarily came together to form a learning community on networks. The network working group (NWG) is made up of staff from across the Centre which meets approximately every two months to learn from one another's experiences, hosts a listserv, and shares electronic and print resources. The NWG requested that the Evaluation Unit work with them on an evaluation process to deepen and improve the collective understanding of IDRC`s role and experience with networks. Given the commitment of the NWG to participate in the evaluation process and the fact that the last corporate evaluation work done on the topic was Anne Bernard`s *IDRC Networks: An Ethnographic Perspective* in 1996, the Evaluation Unit added this study to the corporate evaluation plan approved by SMC in February 2004. Ultimately, the purpose of this evaluation process and the NWG as a whole is learning by IDRC staff so as to improve our programming with Southern research networks.

Definition of Networks

This study will not impose a singular definition of networks because different terms are used to imply the "mechanism" under study (e.g., communities, forums, consortia, etc). Rather than focusing on structures or typologies, for the purpose of this study we have drawn on the definitions provided in papers by Church et al. (2003), Bernard (1996) and Creech and Willard (2001) and will include as "networks" activities that are defined by the following key characteristics, whether they be networks of researchers or multistakeholder:

- networks are social arrangements made up of individuals and representatives of institutions based on establishing and building relationships, sharing tasks and working on mutual or joint activities, enabling new learning and moblizing alternative action;

- networks add value to work that would have otherwise been done individually;

- networks are forums for social exchange, which allow members and users to interact directly with one another so that this interaction influences the way they think or what they do within or outside the network;

- networks open opportunities through shared work to raise the profile of research results, foster cross fertilization, influence the policy community, build research and policy capacities, or build a case for a new research agenda, etc.;

- network members maintain their autonomy as participants.

This study will exclude such activities as information or access networks where the key characteristics of social interaction and relationship building in order to achieve shared outcomes are absent. Also, excluded will be networking activities amongst international donor agencies.

Purpose, Intended Users and Uses

Broadly, the purpose of the evaluation is to capture, from IDRC's experience, how to support effective networks and to analyze some of the fundamental elements and activities that should be considered and acted upon in order to foster healthy and active networks. The evaluation is starting from the assumption that IDRC will continue to support networks therefore the evaluation questions are not about whether to support networks or comparing networks to other modalities but rather relate to making IDRC's support as effective as possible.

Although the findings of this study are of interest to a broader audience within and outside the Centre, the focus of the evaluation process will be on the NWG. The members of the NWG requested the evaluation and have committed to being the primary intended users. They have been involved in the planning of the study to date and have committed to continued involvement through the design and implementation in order to facilitate deepening their knowledge and using the findings in their programming work. The evaluation will provide the NWG members with a rich review of Centre experience with networks from which they can draw out the most useful and relevant lessons. NWG members will serve as the primary conduit of knowledge to their program teams although opportunities for engaging Centre staff and management more broadly in the analysis and dissemination of the findings will be created.

A secondary purpose of the evaluation will be to document the tacit and documented knowledge that exists within the Centre on networks. The findings and outputs will be packaged electronically and in print so that staff and managers will be able to easily access the knowledge when they need it. Given IDRC's reputation and experience with supporting networks, this knowledge should also be made publically available.

Evaluation Issues and Questions

As the topic of networks is so varied and could encompass so many elements, the NWG gave focus to the evaluation based on what they felt would be most useful to learn about in greater depth. What follows are some of the boundaries they set for the study. They did not want the focus of the evaluation to be theoretical as they felt this had been well covered by Anne Bernard in 1996 and that her findings were still relevant. Given the continued relevance of Bernard's findings and the thoroughness of her review of network projects and relevant corporate documentation, it was also determined that the focus of this evaluation should be on the time after her review. Therefore, the period under study for this evaluation is 1995 to the present. The NWG also decided that the most relevant lessons would come from a focus on IDRC-supported networks. In order not to duplicate efforts made in other strategic evaluations such as the policy influence study which has a series of case-studies and analysis of networks and the capacity building study, this study will review the findings and incorporate them into the documents but not focus on these result areas per se.

Based on consultations with the NWG and a review of the issues raised by Centre staff and partners in the June 2003 discussion "IDRC Futures" and the October 2003 Montevideo workshop, the list of evaluation topics and associated questions were refined to the following:

1. **Network Coordination**
   a. What "style" of governance have been used in IDRC-supported networks? (Definition of governance could include: location and nature or coordination function; membership criteria and roles; means of setting/revising goals and decision-making; organizational structure and processes; and modes of communication)
   b. What coordination approaches have been used in IDRC-funded networks? (Definition of coordination approach could include: mechanisms for decision-making, consensus-building & collaboration; donor role; leadership & ownership; learning; continuity; etc.)
   c. What outcomes have these approaches yielded in terms of networking (cooperation, resource mobilization, growth, etc.) and in terms of development results (influence, research capacity, research outputs, etc.)?
   d. With these approaches, what challenges have been encountered and how have they been handled?

2. **Network Sustainability**
   a. What does IDRC mean by sustainability of networks?
   b. From IDRC's experience, when is sustainability a goal for networks and when isn't it a goal? Why?

      c. What factors help or hinder the sustainability of networks?

      d. When a network is planned to have a limited lifespan, what factors facilitate productive functioning and satisfactory wrapping-up/completion of the network?"

3.   **Intended Results / Development Outcomes of Networks**

      a. What have been IDRC's intentions in supporting networks [and how has this evolved over time]?

      b. What have been the objectives of networks [and how have they evolved over time]?

      c. Is there continuity between the corporate intent and the project network objectives?

Given IDRC's commitment to supporting networks, this modular approach based around key topics was deemed most appropriate because in the future other topics relating to networks can be evaluated as needed and added to the findings of this study.

Components and Methodology

In order to deal with the diversity of topics and needs of users, this strategic evaluation will be conducted using a range of methods and will contain 4 main components. The design will not be static, however, and will be adapted as our understanding of the 3 topics deepens. We will pursue new paths of inquiry as they emerge from the findings. In this way, the study is not following a fully emergent design but is sufficiently open-ended to allow us to build on findings from each of the components as they emerge but remain rigorous in our use of qualitative methods.

Because much of the learning will happen throughout the process of conducting these components, the NWG will be engaged in their design and implementation. Engaging the NWG members and other interested staff in analyzing and interpreting the data will also be a key element of the process. In particular, at each stage of the evaluation process, the NWG will review and analyze the "overlaps" between the 3 topics based on the findings of the various components in order to identify connections. This is important in order to deepen people's understanding of the topics.

This approach puts more responsibility on the user of the findings to delve into the products of the study and their analysis in some depth; it also puts more responsibility on the implementation team to ensure appropriate opportunities for analysis of the findings as well as dissemination of the outputs.

Component 1: Review of Documented IDRC Knowledge
To be conducted May - October 2004

Currently, information on networks within the Centre is so diffuse that it is very difficult to ascertain what is already known. As a first step in consolidating IDRC's knowledge, this component will pull together all corporate documentation relevant to each of the 3 topics (coordination, sustainability, and intent) and synthesize the major issues and findings. A separate report detailing the findings on each topic will be prepared.

As appropriate to the topic, the report will review short-form PCRs, evaluation reports, corporate strategies, consultations, prospecti, Board of Governors' minutes, IDRC workshops, etc. Because of the interconnectedness of the topics, each report will also analyze how the topics interrelate.

Once the reports are completed, the NWG will develop a purposeful sampling strategy to conduct case-studies of IDRC-supported networks as well as identify supplementary research with IDRC partners, literature reviews, or expert opinion required to answer the evaluation questions.   Part of the reason for taking this approach is to not over-burden Centre partners with evaluation. The Centre has conducted a significant amount of evaluation recently with the PI external reviews and policy case-studies therefore we do not want to be overly taxing on our partners and should 1st identify what is already known on these 3 topics and then carefully select where case-studies and other research could be particularly useful.

Outputs
- Report on network coordination
- Report on network sustainability
- Report on intended results/development outcomes of networks
- Report of NWG analysis of connections between the 3 topics
- Report for the ALF on the findings from the short-form PCRs

Component 2: Key Informant Interviews & Electronic Survey of Coordinators of IDRC-supported Networks
To Be Conducted August 2004-January 2005

Originally, the field component of this evaluation process was to be a series of case-studies of IDRC supported networks but this was cancelled due to financial constraints. Instead, a sample of coordinators of IDRC-supported networks (since 1995) will be interviewed in-depth either in person or by telephone on the 3 focus topics. Following the interviews, an electronic survey of all coordinators of IDRC-supported networks since 1995 will be sent to ascertain a broader perspective on issues raised in the interviews.

The key-informant interviews will cover the geographic and programmatic spread of the Centre. Because of the intended uses and time frame of this study, sampling criteria will be purposeful and will involve content rich interviews that will yield insights and in-depth understanding of the topics. The attempt is not to

build generic lists of "best practices" or "lessons learned" but rather to understand each of the topics from the perspective of network coordinators and draw out their knowledge so as to make it possible for Centre staff to learn from it. The findings of the interviews and survey are intended to complement and deepen the knowledge captured in the first component, the learning sessions, and the ALF.

A consulting firm will be hired to carry out the survey of network coordinators in English, French, and Spanish. It will be distributed through email. The key informant interviews will be conducted by Terry Smutylo and the consulting firm and, potentially, other members of the Evaluation Unit and the Network Working Group.

Outputs:
- report detailing the findings of the key informant interviews (to be prepared by Terry Smutylo)
- report integrating the findings of the survey and the interviews
- "evaluation highlight" on the findings of the interviews and survey for each topic
- ALF report

Component 3. Learning Sessions
Ongoing in the NWG

The NWG is organizing a series of integrated learning sessions on strategies to support networks. Using storytelling and facilitated discussions, various program staff at IDRC will share stories about their experiences in creating, supporting and strengthening networks. The objective of the sessions is to collectively explore specific experiences with networks in order to identify and record key stories emerging from these experiences. The output of the sessions will be a set of written stories about Centre experiences and the high quality lessons generated through the facilitated discussion. Although each session will have a specific output, the goal is NOT to create a list of generic best practices. The focus will be on dialogue and exchange, recognizing the heterogeneity of experiences that exist throughout the Center from participating in, building and supporting networks.

Output:
- A series of written stories as told by IDRC staff

Dissemination

Each of the topics will be studied following the same methodology and, at the end of the evaluation process, the findings from the various components will be analyzed and presented separately by evaluation topic – coordination, sustainability, and intent. All the outputs, however, will be attractively packaged

together in a single binder and on the Evaluation Unit's website. In this way, there will be a central resource for staff, managers and outside audiences to consult when interested in the topic of networks. Furthermore, the packaging of the findings will allow readers to either focus on one topic in particular or read across the topics in order to learn about IDRC's cumulative experiences with networks.

Building on the experience of the policy study, workshops will be an important forum for dissemination. The NWG will have its regular learning sessions and will have at least 2 findings workshops when findings will be analyzed and decisions about the design of the study will be made.   More broadly, all Centre staff and managers will be invited to participate in the Annual Learning Forum (ALF) in April 2005 (tentatively set for April 5th). Decisions regarding the focus, structure, and process of the ALF will be made by the Rolling-PCR working group as they are responsible for this activity.